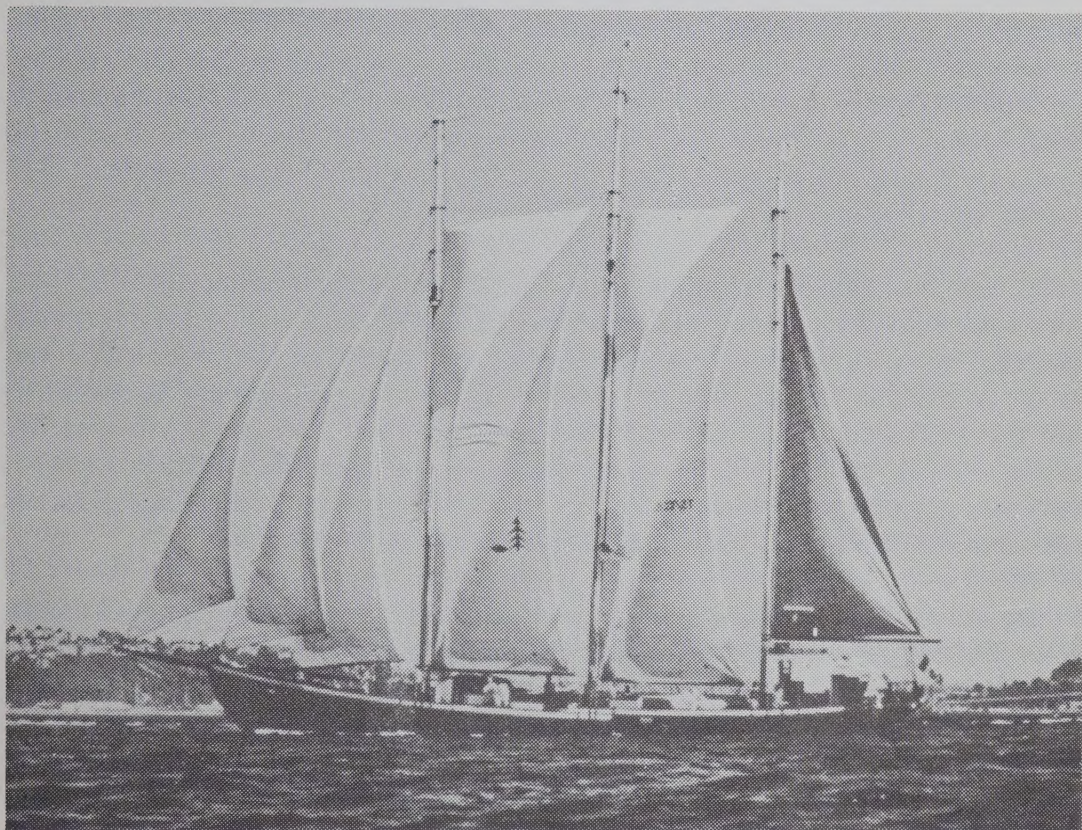




THE BULLETIN

SPRING 1979

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Victoria-based schooner ROBERTSON II, until 1974 an Atlantic fishboat, now a sail training vessel operated by the Quest Star Society. (Story page 2.)

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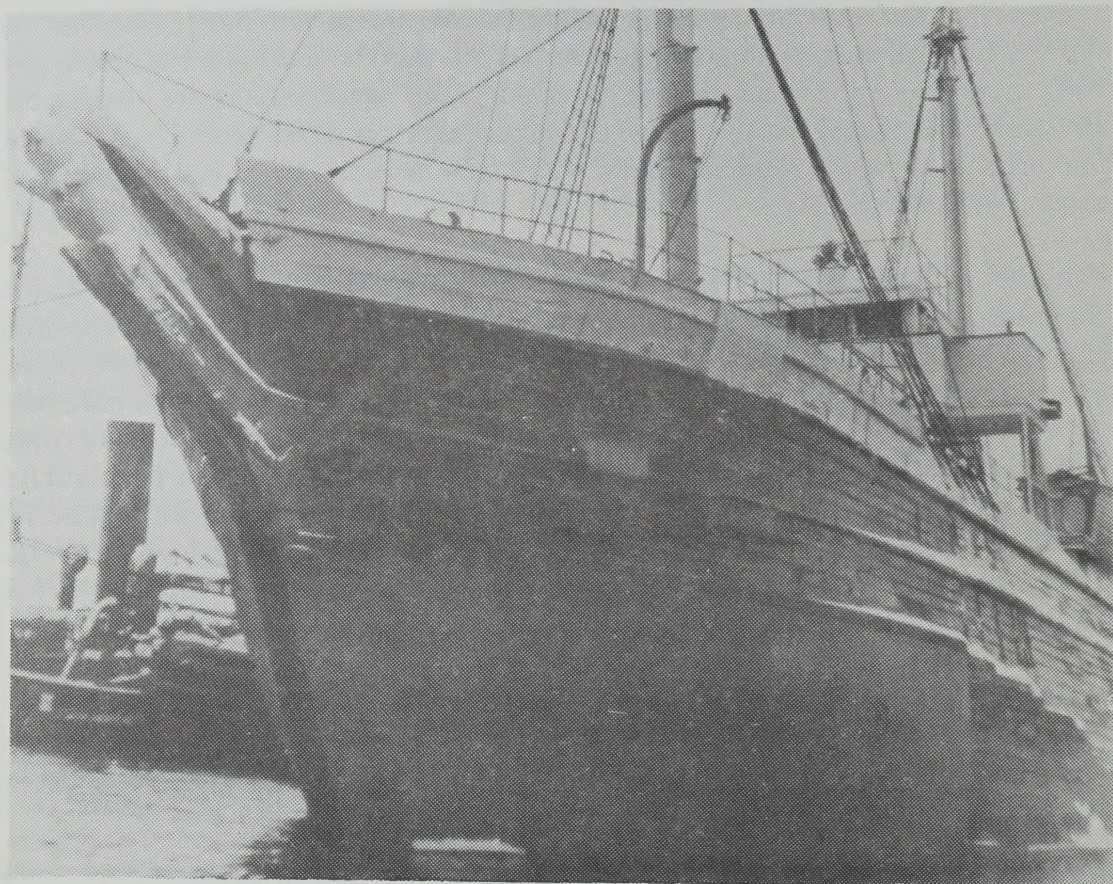
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Veteran of the Bering Sea, Arctic and Antarctic waters, BEAR, ex-Revenue Cutter, languished alongside at Halifax in 1959. (Photo by author).

Polar Ship "BEAR"

by W.W. Wiwcharuk

The month of March marks the anniversary of the death of a great polar ship - BEAR. Still sound at the age of eighty-nine, she plunged to her death sixteen years ago while under tow in a stormy Atlantic. Her demise was premature - brought about by a combination of human error and the whims of nature. Briefly, this is her story.

Built by Alexander Stephens & Sons, Dundee, and launched in 1874 for Walter Grieve of Newfoundland, BEAR was designed as a sealer. Barquentine rigged, her hull was of Scottish oak sheathed in Australian ironwood. Steel plate on her bows gave added strength for ice work. Of 1,675 d.w.t., her dimensions were 190' x 29'9" x 17'6". Propelled by a 101 nominal h.p. steam engine, a speed of 10 knots was made on her passage to Newfoundland. A two-bladed screw was mounted on a hinged shaft which could be raised to avoid ice damage and to reduce drag while under sail.

BEAR worked as a sealer out of St. John's until 1884 when she was purchased by the United States Government to participate - with ALERT and THETIS in the rescue of the famous Greely Expedition. Lt. Greely's party was known to be starving in the Arctic wastes because an 1883 relief expedition had failed to reach them. Six of the twenty-five explorers were saved and BEAR became a household world for many Americans.

After a brief layup in New York she was taken over by the Revenue Marine Service in 1885. Based on San Francisco, she joined RUSH and CORWIN on the Bering Sea Patrol. Their function was to regulate the seal fishery, assist whalers when necessary and to generally explore the somewhat unfamiliar Alaskan waters. So began forty years of service in the U.S. and foreign seal poachers. Some of them were captured, but many evaded the meager resources of the Patrol. On the brighter side, more than a few ice-bound sailors owed their lives to the rescue efforts of BEAR.

At this time, the Bering Sea Patrol was the only law in Alaskan waters. Captain Healy, BEAR's first master on the Patrol, used strong measures to suppress mutiny, which was common. The Captain would board a vessel having a discipline problem and "trice up" the trouble-making crew members. This involved cuffing their hands behind their backs, securing a halyard to these shackles, and hoisting the men up until only their toes had contact with the deck. The desire to go back to work quickly returned to those who underwent this experience! These incidents resulted in a board of enquiry being held; but Healy was acquitted, as no police, judge, or jail was available in Alaska to handle such cases. The Patrol was the law.

Although a stern disciplinarian, Captain Healy also had a humanitarian side. Many Eskimos were starving due to the declining numbers of seal, whale and salmon. To help alleviate this tragic situation, he became involved in a scheme to purchase reindeer in Siberia and use BEAR to transport them to the Alaskan Eskimos. Although not many deer were bought at first, the program was later expanded by others and was a step in the right direction. The sad postscript to Captain Healy's command was that in 1895 he was convicted of abusing his officers and endangering BEAR while drunk. The toughness which made him the scourge of maritime criminals was also his Achilles' heel.

Eighteen ninety-four saw the formation of the Revenue Cutter Service, and BEAR was transferred to it - the black hull painted white - and based in Seattle. She was once again useful in law enforcement, this time during the Yukon gold rush. But by far the biggest international problem was the seal fishery. The United States and Great Britain had come to an understanding on limiting the sea fishery, but the Japanese, Russians, and Canadians would not co-operate. The seal herds were being decimated and BEAR and her sister Cutters were hard pressed to interdict the slaughter.

The winter of 1897 proved to be a major catastrophe for the northern whaling fleet. They became locked fast in the ice, and did not have enough stores to last through the winter. BEAR was despatched with supplies and the men comprising the Overland Relief Expedition. She could not penetrate the ice all the way to the fleet, so the Expedition completed the last leg of the journey by land and over the ice pack. Thus, the whalers survived the winter and BEAR became the first ship to penetrate the northern ice during the winter.

The Nome gold rush exploded in greedy hysteria in 1899 and BEAR served as best she could to maintain some semblance of law and order. But this was the least of her concerns. The Eskimos were in an ever-worsening condition; disease and starvation were rampant, and BEAR's crew spent much time burying the dead and carrying the

survivors to more healthful locations. Liquor added to the problem, and the ice ship patrolled as far away as Hawaii to interdict American whalers who engaged in this illicit trade.

BEAR became a U.S. Coast Guard Cutter when that service was formed in 1915. But by 1925 she was overtaken by modern technology, laid up in Oakland, California, and replaced on her northern patrols by the steel icebreaker NORTHLAND. The ship was then handed over to Oakland on the stipulation that the public be given access, and she was made into a museum. She was not entirely idle, being made a movie star playing the part of the MACEDONIA in Fox Films' version of "The Sea Wolf", and also saw service as a school ship. When the Great Depression struck, Oakland could no longer afford to maintain the vessel and she was put up for auction. BEAR narrowly escaped the bid of a shipbreaker. The explorer, Admiral Byrd - who knew of her prowess as an ice ship - bought her for the sum of one thousand and fifty dollars. She was sent round to the Boston Navy Yard for an overhaul.

In September, 1933, BEAR set off on the Byrd Expedition into the Antarctic. However, a hurricane off Cape Hatteras dealt a severe mauling and she had to be drydocked for repairs. The ship finally got away at the end of October with the supply ship RUPPERT and helped establish the scientific base at Little America. After spending the summer in the Ross Sea the ship headed for New Zealand, only to encounter another hurricane in which she almost foundered, at times rolling as much as fifty degrees. In January, 1935, BEAR and RUPPERT returned to the Ross Sea and carried the Byrd Expedition home.

The Admiral thought that BEAR had ended her useful life as a polar ship. So once again retired and her figurehead was presented to the Mariners Museum at Newport News. When it became apparent that Nazi Germany had designs on the Antarctic, the United States decided to mount another expedition to reassert their presence. Admiral Byrd promptly sold the ship to the United States Navy for one dollar and the Navy fitted her out with a 600 h.p. diesel and sent her once again to the southern continent.

With patrol vessels in short supply early in World War Two, BEAR was still in demand. In October of 1941 - as a member of the Greenland Patrol - she had the honour of towing the first German vessel captured in the war to Boston Harbour. She was the sealer BOSKOE - loaded with weather and radio equipment - captured by the NORTHLAND and the NORTH STAR. The seizure took place nearly two months before Pearl Harbour!

When Allied shipyards were finally catching up with orders for patrol craft, BEAR's naval service was terminated. On June 7, 1944 she was decommissioned, stripped of all fittings, and eventually put up for disposal in 1948. Once more the prospect of the wrecker's hammer loomed ahead; but her luck held and she was given a new lease on life. Shaw Steamship Co. of Halifax, N.S. considered her to be still useful as a sealer and purchased her for fifty-five hundred dollars. Unfortunately, the price of seal skins declined and BEAR's reactivation could not be justified in the light of high refitting costs. She languished for fifteen years in a backwater of Halifax Harbour until 1963, when it was proposed by a Philadelphia restaurant owner that the ship would make a

good combination restaurant and museum. She was bought for twelve thousand, five hundred dollars.

In his haste to get her to sea, the new owner did not adequately prepare the vessel for a tow in the seasonally blustery Atlantic weather. Top masts and spars had been rigged, but their stays were inadequate. Her lead pig ballast had been sold but not replaced. Worst of all, the topside seams were in need of recaulking, and there were no functioning pumps aboard.

On Sunday, March 17, 1963, trailing behind the tug IRVINE BIRCH, BEAR severed her ties with the shore forever. By Tuesday, tug and consort encountered heavy weather. The towline parted and she rolled beam-on in the sea. Soon her main and mizzen masts became loose, her main topmast and for topmast snapped! The Atlantic gushed through her seams! The two men who had been aboard her - the last two - abandoned ship. At 9:10 p.m. March 19, BEAR disappeared from men's sight forever, but hopefully never from men's memory.

Editor's Delight_____

This edition of your BULLETIN is due almost entirely to the efforts and interest of the membership. All articles except that of the Director and the TILIKUM report were contributed. It should be noted that the names of three of the authors also appear in the listing of recent new members.

This most welcome response to long repeated appeals for material is appreciated. May the good example be widely followed.

Editor

Correction CGS ESTEVAN_____

(WINTER 1978/79)

We'd rather stand corrected than lie ignored. Mr. M.L. Ball has notified us that the term "surface condensing boiler" used was incorrect. The author acknowledges the error. The correct statement would be that the original surface condensing engines were converted and fitted with water tube boilers in 1935.

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